

# The Pueblo Chieftain

## Fossil fuels to fill power gap

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SAN FRANCISCO — Flying over the Sierra Nevada as California entered its fourth year of drought, the state's energy chief looked down and saw stark bare granite cloaked in dirty brown haze — not the usual pristine white peaks heaped with snow that would run the state's hydroelectric dams for the year.

Spring is arriving with the Pacific Northwest measuring near record-low-snowfall, and much of the rest of the West below average. But what California is experiencing is historically low snowpack — a meager accumulation that has serious implications not only for the state but potentially for the entire West if the drought not just of water, but of snow, persists.

Snowpack at 12 percent of average in the Sierra Nevada means there is less runoff to feed rivers and streams that run through dams to generate cleanly produced hydroelectric power. Despite the state's ambitious clean-air goals, officials are turning to dirtier, more costly fossil-fuel plants to fill some of the power gap. They also will seek more hydroelectricity imports in a region expected to have markedly less to offer this summer. At a minimum, "we'll keep the lights on," said Robert Weisenmiller, chairman of the California Energy Commission. "We're not concerned about not having power. "What we're concerned about is the power is going to come from different sources not as benign" for the health of people and the environment as hydroelectricity.

A study this past week by the nonprofit Pacific Institute think tank in Oakland, Calif., estimated that three years of waning hydroelectricity during California's drought already have cost utility ratepayers \$1.4 billion, including purchases of power from natural gas-fired plants to make up for reduced hydroelectric power. The increased reliance on fossil fuel also caused an 8 percent rise in emissions of climate-changing carbon dioxide in California, the Pacific Institute said. Dams produced 12 percent of the state's electricity in 2013, the most recent year for which figures are available. Natural gas provided 61 percent. The numbers for hydroelectric power will go down for California in 2015 but not disappear, Oglesby said.